

Lesage firing protested

by Chuck Kleinhans

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A steadily growing protest over the firing of Julia Lesage, a founding editor of JUMP CUT and a feminist activist, is now under way. When she was fired from her job teaching English at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus (UICC). This spring, a student, faculty, and community protest began. Since then many letters to the schools administration by distinguished film scholars and critics here and abroad have protested this assistant professors dismissal. In May a student organized meeting drew a campus crowd of over 100 enthusiastic supporters. In June, *Chicago Tribune* labor columnist Mike LaVelle wrote a scathing attack on the UICC action, seeing it as an attempt to get rid of a popular teacher concerned with urban working class students.

The protest began when Lesage was given a final year following a departmental review of her four years at Circle. The review, in which associate and full professors secretly voted, went against Lesage. In justifying the decision, the acting chairman admitted that Lesage's record of service was excellent and her teaching fully competent. However, he said, the department found her scholarship "unilluminating."

The main reason her work appears to be unsatisfactory is that Lesage has consistently published Marxist and feminist scholarship which her department and the UICC administration refuse to recognize as valid precisely because it is radical. (A case of exclusion by definition: if it is Marxist and/or feminist, it cannot be scholarship.) Given the secret balloting and official secrecy surrounding the decision and the appeal process, the true reasons for the dismissal are not perfectly clear, but increasingly the pattern indicates this to be a politically motivated firing of an active leftist. The politics of the firing stand out clearly when we measure the official explanations against the facts.

The Circle English department hired Lesage as its first film person in

1973. Like many others, it wanted to offer appealing high-enrollment film courses to offset falling enrollments in traditional areas. However the department has shown a narrow-minded elitist disrespect for film studies. It loves the golden eggs but hates having to feed the goose.

Knowing the level of ignorance in the faculty, when coning up for review Lesage requested an outside evaluation by film specialists. A number of established cinema academics wrote evaluations, including Ran Gottesman, director of the Center for Humanities at the University of Southern California and editor of the *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Ron Levaco, professor at San Francisco State and translator and editor of Kuleshov; Richard Dyer McCann at Iowa, author, editor, and pioneer in establishing U.S. film studies; and Calvin Pryluck at North Carolina, a leader in the University Film Association. The evaluations clearly established Lesage as a respected and excellent scholar. During the departmental review these leading senior figures in film studies were dismissed as a film-world coterie of friends who uncritically support each other's work. (In fact Lesage had never met many of her evaluators before being reviewed and knew most of the others only through passing acquaintance at academic meetings.) Confronted with a delegation of Women's Studies professors, the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs claimed that Lesage's writings, such as her pioneering study of French theorist Roland Barthes ("S/Z and RULES OF THE GAME," JUMP CUT 12/13) were only "movie reviews in an underground newspaper" and not valid. In a similar vein, when one administrator dismissed JUMP CUT, a student responded by showing him Amos Vogel's recent praise of JUMP CUT in a regular *Film Comment* column. The appalling reply was that Vogel (a major figure in the serious appreciation of film for 25 years) and *Film Comment* had no credibility.

Asked by students to justify voting against Lesage, one senior professor admitted to not knowing what the established publications in film were but was sure Lesage had not published in them. (Ignorance is bliss!) The fact that Lesage served on three major film publications—contributing editor of *Cineaste*, associate editor of *Women and Film*, and associate editor of JUMP CUT—a remarkable recognition for any beginning academic—was turned into an astounding Catch-22. Editorial participation in three publications, according to some faculty, "proved" her work inferior because those publications would publish what she wrote automatically. Although knowing this to be an outrageous lie, the chairman never attempted to contact the editors of the publications to ascertain anything about Lesage's work.

The real explanation behind these flimsy justifications sew to be the total hostility of many English department faculty and the UICC administration to Marxism and feminism. They dismiss Lesage's work because it doesn't appear in the "right" publications, even though the people deciding don't understand the range of film publications. And

they conveniently ignore the fact that *Women and Film*, *Cineaste*, and JUMP CUT have been the only established U.S. film publication which consistently publish feminist and Marxist criticism.

Administrators have used other logically inconsistent statements against Lesage. The chairman told her that her writing style was not satisfactory: it was both too pedantic and too journalistic. Similarly, the pattern of lame justification continued when the student Coalition to Save Julia Lesage met with the school's chancellor, Donald Riddle, April 27. He said, "If only a small number of people are doing that kind of work [i.e., film studies at Circle], it is important that they be first class. In my judgment, the record does not support the conclusion that she is first class." In response. Paul Chabala, editor of the student newspaper wrote. "If Julia Lesage is not first class, who do they want—God?"

The claim of poor scholarship looks even sillier when looking at Lesage's publications. She is completing a book-length research guide and critical bibliography on Godard. Already two of her articles have been anthologized, three have been republished in translation abroad (Germany, Sweden, Italy), and one article was reprinted in *Screen* with a long response. On addition, Lesage has given papers at numerous academic conferences, professional meetings, and film festivals.

Since her firing many academics have written protest letters to the UOCC administration attesting to Lesage's qualifications. The following are representative remarks by people whose names are well-known to anyone in film studies:

- "From the first she became a dominant figure in the critical discourse in both this country and abroad."
- "Many of the important film critics in America were in the room; however Julia was the most informed and informative person there."
- "Perhaps the simplest way of indicating my, and my colleagues' esteem for Miss Lesage is to say that if we had a position here, I would not hesitate to turn the University of Illinois' loss into our gain."
- "I myself consider her one of a half dozen prime movers in the effort to raise the academic standards of this relatively new discipline ..."
- "The fact is that within her field she is a scholar, not only of rare distinction, but of international reputation."
- "By my standards, Dr. Lesage is a fine example of the type of film scholar who has begun to break new ground, opening up avenues for others in other disciplines."
- "I consider her one of the most promising film scholars in the country ..."

When such evaluations are added to a consideration of Lesage's service

and teaching, the results are truly impressive. In her four years in Chicago Lesage edited the program booklet for and helped organize the Chicago Woman's Film Festival (1974), worked on the Revolutionary Film Festival (1976) sponsored by the Art Institute, worked with the Grey Panthers to set up a film series for senior citizens, advised the Free Street Theatre for several years, has participated in community film screenings, and has been a constant advisor and resource person for filmmakers, teachers, and community film users in the Chicago area. Speaking at a student protest meeting, Ruby Rich of the Art Institute's Film Center said, "She has made it a point to know the work [in film] going on in this city ... She's been a starting point for a lot of people in Chicago."

In addition, Lesage has been very active in Circle's women's liberation group, participating with them to organize support for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in Illinois, protest the use of student fees to show a racist, pornographic film on campus, and fight for better security for women against assault on campus. She has also worked extensively with the Chicago Women's Liberation Union, a city-wide socialist feminist organization, and has helped start study groups on Marxism and feminist film criticism.

Her remarkable contribution in community service is matched by her accomplishment in teaching. Hardly a great supporter, the head of the English department said, "Julia is a conscientious, good, competent teacher." Lesage has taught composition and introduction to literature and developed her own film and literature courses on themes such as women or the working class. She planned and taught a special composition course for Latino students (Lesage was assistant head of the English department at the Pontifical Catholic University in Lima, Peru from 1967 to 1970), and she organized a film course for Chicago trade unionists through the university's Labor Education program.

In addition she has taught Women's Studies as part of the UICE Women's Studies teaching collective. This unpaid work has involved extensive weekly meetings, planning, teaching, and administrative work during the past four years of establishing the program. Lesage has lectured on film, the arts, Third World women, sexuality, and women in the work force. Again and again her students have praised her teaching with comments such as, "She changed my life," or "the first teacher who ever really listened to students."

Why then, with this outstanding record, is Lesage being fired? On the departmental level various factors seem to be involved. Some traditionalist faculty have no respect for film and believe it incompatible with scholarship. Others (innocently or deliberately) remain ignorant of film studies but feel qualified to pass judgment on someone in it. Many refuse to grant any validity to Marxist scholarship; many deny feminist

criticism and semiology any place in the university. Some faculty probably feared advancing any junior faculty. Before the meeting voting on Lesage, the chairman disseminated a proposed cutback schema that would have eliminated faculty positions by starting with the most senior people. Part of the reason is doubtless the Circle English department's tradition of abusing junior faculty. A few years ago the department fired 19 new teachers in one year, who in turn instigated a lawsuit, and the chairman is currently being sued by a group of instructors over job grievances. Over the years the department became notorious for competitive hiring—giving jobs to several young people with the same specialty at the same time and then indicating only one would be kept on. In addition, the department places decision making among its 80-odd members in the hands of an inner clique. Of the 29 faculty who voted on Lesage, many had never spoken with her in her four years there. A further factor may be resentment of the quantity and quality of Lesage's writing which far outdistances that of the tenured faculty in her department.

While various factors operate here, the decisive reasons for the firing seem political, which explains the focus on Lesage's Marxist and feminist scholarship as grounds for dismissal. In the same vein, we find evidence of considerable resentment against Lesage's activist stance, although it was not cited in the firing (probably because it would instantly clarify the political nature of the firing and raise issues of free speech and academic freedom). Lesage is highly visible in campus Women's Liberation, in her AFT union local, in supporting radical student causes, and last winter and spring in a faculty group supporting a massive student coalition which protested administration plans to change admission standards to effectively exclude most urban black, Latino, and working class white students at the school in favor of white, middle class suburban students. Throughout her four years at Circle, Lesage has spoken out in her teaching by raising questions of the oppression of women, blacks, latinos, gays and lesbians, prisoners, and the working class—all subject areas many of her departmental colleagues chose to ignore.

On the administrative level, where the case is now being appealed, Lesage represents a threat to the dominant group of administrators who want to change the school. It was established ten years ago with a mandate from the Illinois legislature and Board of Higher Education to fulfill an urban mission of teaching urban students, who couldn't afford residential education at the central campus in Urbana or one of the other state universities, and to serve as a resource for the city of Chicago by focusing on urban issues. The current executives have plans for the school as a "Harvard on Halsted Street," and they want a traditionalist and conservative faculty that will support the change. A teacher like Lesage, even with an international scholarly reputation, is too dangerous because she stands up for minority, women, and working

class students.

The struggle to keep Lesage at Circle has gained considerable momentum. The Student Coalition to Save Julia Lesage will continue to confront the hierarchy over the summer and plans a new round of protests in the fall. Concerned faculty have also been pressuring for reinstatement. Community support from film people, feminists, and activists has increased, as has media coverage of the fight. Letters of support have helped bolster the effort. Peter Knauss, professor of Political Science who successfully fought a very similar attempted firing at UICC a few years ago, explains: "The question isn't one of begging for Julia's job. But the university is a public institution and vulnerable to student and public pressure. Each letter shows those in power that the issues won't just go away."

Lesage herself is optimistic about the fight. "At first," she says, "I thought I'd just leave. I'm sure I can find a better job in terms of salary, prestige, and so forth. But once the word was out that I was fired, all kinds of people told me I had to fight—teachers, students, community people, other radicals. I came to realize that although my job is the tangible object of the struggle, this is really a fight about a lot of other things. It's about having film recognized as a legitimate area of study. It's about having Marxist and feminist criticism accepted as valid in U.S. higher education. It's about the importance of combining research with a real involvement in the social and political issues of our time."

Chicago Tribune columnist LaVelle puts it this way:

"The real issue is not whatever the university wishes to define as 'scholarship' but what the definition of a 'university' is. I have met college professors who I thought had the brains of turnips and the compassion of stone. They never would know their human faults because in the insular world that they lived in, no one would ever tell than ... It is for her populism that she is being fired."

The battle for Lesage's job will continue into the coming academic year (at present her last one at UICC). Letters of support are needed and should be addressed to: Chancellor Donald Riddle, 2833 University Hall, UICC. Chicago IL 60680, with copies to Norman Cantor, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, 2703 University Hall; UICC, Dean Elmer Hadley, Liberal Arts and Sciences, 350 University Hall, UICC; and Julia Lesage, English, 2221 University Hall, UICC. A full list of Lesage's qualifications and publications is available from JUMP CUT, 3138 W. Schubert, Chicago IL 60647.

